

# The Role of the Snohomish County Marine Resources Advisory Committee in the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative

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## Abstract

The marine ecosystem and resources in the Northwest Straits (northern Puget Sound and the Straits of Juan de Fuca) are in decline. Depleted resources have hurt economies and communities in the area. Seven counties guided by the Northwest Straits Initiative, have formed Marine Resource Committees (MRCs) to address the issues. The MRCs are over half way through a five-year period mandated to produce measurable progress in meeting specific benchmarks.

The Snohomish County Marine Resource Advisory Committee (MRC) is an 11 member group of citizen volunteers representing economic, recreational, conservation, and environmental interests along with local and tribal governments. The role of the MRC is to address local issues and guided by science and the needs of the marine ecosystem, to advise county officials of remedial action.

Snohomish County is the most populous of the seven counties and has heavily impacted its shoreline and marine resources. The MRC has conducted public outreach and education programs and used feedback to identify water quality, nearshore habitat, forage fish and Dungeness crab as areas of focus. Plans are being formulated to initiate local action to protect and restore marine habitat and resources.

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The Snohomish County Marine Resources Advisory Committee was authorized by the U.S. Congress (Pub. L. 105-384) as part of the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative and by Snohomish County Ordinance (S.C. Ord. 99-080). The role of the committee in meeting the objectives of the initiative is discussed.

The waters of Puget Sound and the Georgia Basin contain valuable marine resources. These resources are under great pressure and many are in decline. The portions of these waters that lie in the United States are called the Northwest Straits. The Northwest Straits are made up of the northwest seven counties in Washington State (Clallam, Island, Jefferson, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish and Whatcom). They include the shores of northern Puget Sound, the San Juan Islands and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. This is a politically defined area and does not necessarily fit natural geographic boundaries, which would include adjoining Canadian waters and southern Puget Sound.

The Northwest Straits Commission (NWSC) was created by the U.S. Congress with bi-partisan support (HR 3461) in 1998. The Commission was formed to provide a local bottom-up citizen driven approach to addressing the issues. The Commission recommended that each of the seven counties form a Marine Resource Committee (MRC) to protect and restore the vital marine resources of the region. The Commission provides seed funding and administrative support to the MRCs. The expectation is that the combination of scientific foundation and grass roots consensus building will produce cost-effective strategies and solutions to protect and restore the marine resources of the Northwest Straits.

Benchmarks are specified to evaluate performance and a five-year time period was imposed to measure results. The Benchmarks restated from the Murray-Metcalf report, include:

- Broad county participation in MRCs.
- Achieve a scientifically based, regional system of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).
- A net gain in highly ecologically productive nearshore, intertidal and estuarine habitat in the Northwest Straits, and no significant loss of existing, high-value habitat; improve state, tribal, and local tools to map assess, and protect nearshore habitat and prevent harm from upland activities.
- Net reduction in shellfish harvest areas closed due to contamination.
- Measurable increases in factors supporting recovery of bottom fish (such as rockfish)—including numbers of fish of broodstock size and age, average fish size, and abundance of prey species—as well as sufficient amounts and quality of protected habitat.

- Increases in other key marine indicator species (including those identified in the 1997 West report on Puget Sound marine resources).
- Coordination of scientific data (for example, through the Puget Sound Ambient Monitoring Program), including a scientific baseline, common protocols, unified GIS, and sharing of ecosystem assessments and research.
- Coordinate with the Puget Sound Action Team and other entities on an effective outreach and education effort with measurements of the numbers of people contacted as well as changes in behavior.

These benchmarks will be a challenge to meet, some of them by their very nature need a longer period of time than five years to produce results. Rockfish for example, live a long time. Most do not reach breeding age in the five-year period mandated in the initiative. Some benchmarks are controversial and are opposed by some groups. Not all of the benchmarks can be achieved by all counties. The bottomfish benchmark for example is most appropriate for the counties with rocky reef habitat. One of the challenges is determining which benchmarks apply to Snohomish County.

Portions of Snohomish County are highly urbanized being part of the greater Seattle metropolitan area. There is a large portion of the marine shoreline that has been modified by all sorts of industry and commerce. The area has a high growth rate and complex government. At the same time there are still pristine sections of shoreline and beaches. Two large, important river estuaries lie within the county. Two tribes, the Tulalip and the Stillaguamish, are located within the county. They and other tribes have traditionally harvested marine resources in county waters.

**Table 1.** Northwest Straights Commission County Demographics and Geographics.

<b>County</b>	<b>Area (sq mi)</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>pop density</b>	<b>&lt;1&gt; marine shoreline (mi)</b>	<b>&lt;1&gt; modified shoreline (mi)</b>	<b>&lt;1&gt; % shoreline modified</b>	<b>&lt;2&gt; Govt type</b>
Clallam	1,739	65,759	38	254	27	11	3 member commission
Island	208	74,114	356	214	49	23	3 member commission
Jefferson	1,814	26,584	15	254	22	9	3 member commission
San Juan	175	14,515	83	408	19	5	3 member commission
Skagit	1,735	105,247	61	229	81	35	3 member commission
<b>Snohomish</b>	<b>2,089</b>	<b>622,900</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>5 member council, exec</b>
Whatcom	2,120	170,849	81	147	49	34	7 member council, exec

Table 1 is a comparison of information about the Northwest Straits counties, with the Snohomish County information highlighted. Some interesting observations can be made from this information. Snohomish is the most populous of the seven counties; well above the total of all the rest combined. It also has the largest amount of modified shoreline at 75%. This is the highest in the state (Washington State Department of Natural Resources). A large amount of modified shoreline is due to the railroad bed, which has been in place for over a century. The county is governed by a five-member county council and a county executive.

The Snohomish County Marine Resources Advisory Committee (MRC) is a volunteer citizen group responsible for developing recommendations to protect and restore marine resources in Snohomish County and the Northwest Straits. The MRC is not a part of Snohomish County government. It is made up of representatives from local and tribal government as well as recreational, commercial, business and environmental representation. The MRC is fortunate to have capable staff support provided by the Surface Water Management Division of the Snohomish County Public Works Department.

The mission of the MRC, guided by sound science and the needs of the Northwest Straits marine ecosystem, is to address local marine issues, recommend remedial actions to local authorities, and build local awareness of the issues and support for remedies. The goals of the MRC (S.C. Ord. 99-080) are to:

- Encourage strong county participation in MRCs.
- Consistent with a scientifically based regional system of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), identify local candidate sites and urge their inclusion at the appropriate level.
- Help ensure a net gain in highly ecologically productive near shore, inter tidal, and estuarine habitat within the county, as well as no significant loss of existing, high-value habitat.
- Work with state, tribal and local authorities to map, assess and protect near shore habitat and prevent harm from upland activities through local and state ordinances and shoreline plans.

- Help ensure a net reduction in shellfish harvest areas closed due to contamination.
- Contribute to measurable increases in factors supporting bottom fish recovery (such as rockfish) as well as sufficient amounts and quality of protected habitat.
- Contribute to increases in other key marine indicator species.

To resolve concerns of county government and clarify the mission, the MRC was specifically named an advisory committee. Snohomish County was the last of the Northwest Straits counties to establish an MRC and did not participate in the first round of funding. The MRC provides an annual report about marine resources to the Snohomish County Council and Executive.

When the MRC was formed, many of the members had no experience being part of such a group. Committee members were not well informed about the marine resource situation in the county. The initial focus was on training. MRC members learned about marine resource issues from experts on the various topics. Members also received guidance in learning how to function as an MRC. County staff and the NWSC provided valuable support. Being the last county to launch had the benefit of the shared experiences of the other six MRCs.

The importance of a strong working relationship with the tribes was recognized. The tribes have co-management authority with the state for harvest of various marine resources. They have significant expertise and capability, and are a valuable partner with, and part of, the Snohomish County MRC.

A work plan has been prepared that includes member training and a data gap analysis. A nearshore assessment is underway to provide a portion of the missing data. The MRC conducted public meetings to inform and collect input for incorporation into the work plan.

A series of public meetings were held where input from the public was sought and recorded to learn what was important to them. Typically a presentation started things off to introduce the MRC and its mission and to stimulate response. Attendance at the public meetings was generally sparse, but the intimate nature allowed for candid input and discussions.

In the summer months Beach Expos were conducted. These were designed to be hands-on, with aquaria, microscopes and beach walks. In contrast to the public meetings, these were usually much better attended. The MRC received useful feedback and learned a lot. For instance, after the first beach expo, it was discovered that the committee had forgotten to include a sign identifying itself. A sign with the name of the MRC was ready by the time of the second event. Plenty of useful comments from the public resulted from these events.

The input received from the public was compiled and reviewed by the MRC members and staff. This input combined with the training that MRC members received about county resources was the basis for a planning exercise to identify which areas to concentrate future efforts. The committee also considered which of the NWSC benchmarks was most appropriate for the county to support. One thing that resonated was the interdependence of all the different elements of the nearshore ecosystem. The completed list contained four components:

- Physical habitat
- Marine vegetation
- Forage fish
- Dungeness crab

Physical habitat and Marine vegetation were combined to a category named Nearshore habitat.

The committee elected to focus on a few things and to do them well instead of taking on too much. The MRC chose to continue outreach efforts; beach expos were popular and effective. Outreach made sense, Snohomish County is the most populous county in the Northwest Straits. The MRC has the ability to reach the most people and to directly support one of the NWSC benchmarks. The committee also chose to initiate projects dealing with Dungeness crab and forage fish. These are closely related to the near shore habitat category identified in the planning exercise.

The committee is up and running. Members are able to work together effectively representing the varied interests involved. The MRC has been through internal changes and changes in county government. On the other hand the clock is ticking and there still is a lot to do.

Additional information is available from Snohomish County and NWSC websites:

- Snohomish County Marine Resources Committee: <http://www.co.snohomish.wa.us/mrc.htm>
- Northwest Straits Commission: [www.nwstraits.org](http://www.nwstraits.org)

**References:**

Murray-Metcalf Northwest Straits Citizens Advisory Commission, "Report to the Convenors," 1998.

Ordinance No 99-080, Snohomish County Council, "An Ordinance Establishing the Snohomish County Marine Resources Advisory Committee," 1999.